

Alice Bretz

"YOU'RE IN A NEW WORLD" THAT'S
WHAT A SURGEON SAID--IN
DIFFERENT WORDS.
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“You’re in a New World”

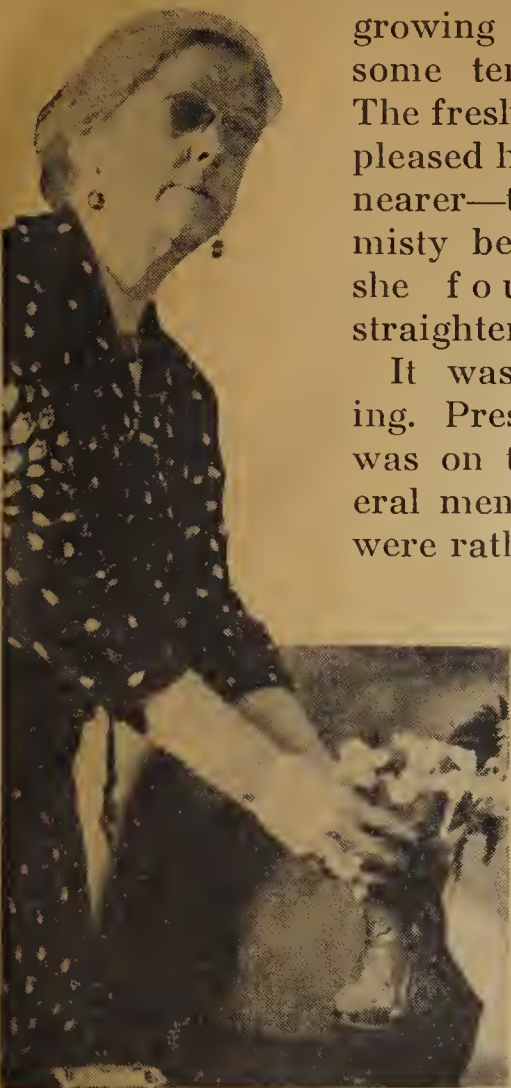
That’s what a Surgeon Said—in Different Words

IT was very peaceful that day on the farm. Out in the garden, city-bred Mrs. Alice Bretz, who had adopted the farm because she loved out

of doors and working with growing things bent over some tender young plants. The fresh green of the leaves pleased her. She bent a little nearer—then the leaves grew misty before her eyes, and she found she couldn’t straighten up.

It was odd and confusing. Presently however, she was on the porch and several members of the family were rather excitedly calling

to each other and asking her questions. That was the beginning—and the end. The end of seeing the world as she had seen it; of stepping briskly off down the road or of working in the beloved garden or of doing anything in the way



Everything has its place—a necessary rule for her.

she had been doing it all her life.

For something—it is a very rare disease, doctors say, which has seldom been known to attack the eyes—had been caught into certain tissues of her body and after that, for long months, Mrs. Bretz was under constant surveillance, experiment, almost frantic attempts to keep the daylight from forever fading. Mrs. Bretz was the calmest of all but only she knows what went on in her heart and mind those days. She had particular and unusual care for her husband—dead now—was an orthopedic surgeon, and his brothers in the medical and surgical world brought all that they possessed of every kind of knowledge.

Then one day Mrs. Bretz spoke brightly of the farm and the garden. She had bandages on her

eyes as usual but so many months had passed—she was sure the enforced idleness couldn’t be much longer. “I’ll soon be working again in my garden, won’t I doctor?” was her question. She was addressing a man who was a friend of her husband’s, a medical man who had done his best but who knew he had failed. He braced himself. His voice in the effort to keep it calm was almost hard. “No, Mrs. Bretz,” he answered. “You won’t work in the garden anymore. You won’t do anything that requires eyesight—for you’re blind, stone blind.”

And that’s how Mrs. Alice Bretz knew that she had left the world, the grand, the glorious world where beauty and motion and color and distances offer themselves, and had stepped firmly and forever into a strange place where every thing had to be learned over again; where nothing is like the old, nothing has the dear familiarity of other times but voices and noises, and even they take on different impacts, significances.

“And there I was,” says Mrs. Bretz. “And what, pray you, was I going to do about it?” As you talk to her today—to probably the most unusual blind woman in the country (officials of the American Foundation for the Blind and others familiar with the problems of the blind feel this is true of her) you constantly feel the power of the spirit—the innate strength of the mind which puts aside those nice soft cushions of self-pity and appeal that most of us would lean upon in like circumstances.

“If They Believe They Can”

“Self-pity—it’s an abomination!” says Mrs. Bretz with emphasis. “Nobody can accomplish *anything* bound by *that*.” And Mrs. Bretz *has* accomplished. “I’m glad if anything I’ve proved helps others”, she adds and it’s plain that her philosophy is: “If *I* can do these things usually considered difficult or impossible, others can too, if they *believe* they can.”

Something like this she told me one day recently, in her New York apartment, where *she lives alone*. This brave and remarkable experiment—living alone, and deliberately—is unique in the records of the blind. And Mrs. Bretz *lives*. She doesn’t mope or pass gingerly in a limited

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heart didn't leap to my throat—it went clear to the top of my head,” she says laughingly. “I strained forward, waiting. All of my friends’ warnings, the many stories of assault and robbery and even murder that I had ever heard, came rushing into my mind. Right there I had to face extreme fear and decide what I was going to do about it. If I was going to be afraid, I was licked—life would become a shrinking, fearsome thing. In that moment, I lived a long long time—but I decided I wouldn't be afraid.

“I spoke calmly, asking if anyone was there, and honestly there was no longer a particle of fear. No one answered me, of course, and creaking boards—on a still, cold night *how* loudly they can perform—have never frightened me since.”

Fun in Life

But there were other fears—mental handicaps, and if she had accepted them, she would have limited and curtailed much happiness. For instance, there's the matter of reading. Always fond of books, as soon as she knew she never again would see a printed page, she asked about Braille. Now attuning the brain to the finger tips requires such will power that comparatively few, after middle life, are able to master it. “Well, of course you *might*—if you really *want* to” it was conceded. Of course she learned Braille, and for good measure learned Braille number three, which is a sort of Braille shorthand.

“It's great fun on a cold night to read under the covers,” this sprightly Braille bookworm asserts. “If the book's dull, you just fall asleep and do nothing about it. If it's exciting and interesting, you go right on reading, all snug and warm, through the whole night if you want to.”

Another way she finds “fun” in life, is cooking. There's an electric stove that she manipulates without any trouble, and a toaster (electric) that automatically pops up slices, even and warm and with everything in its place, she prepares and serves tea to any visitor, who (if it's

a first time as a guest here) is amazed and delighted. She has thought out every detail of her unique housekeeping plans, surmounting problems that the person who sees, would never think of. . . . A luscious red tomato, printed shiny and plump on the front wrapper of a can *feels* no different, of course, than does an absorbing green study of early June peas. But *this* housekeeper doesn't open one for the other. Canned goods (the grocer's boy helps with this) is alphabetically arranged, from asparagus, down.

Independence and Courage

She has household rules and little routines worked out with infinite patience. One rule is to instantly return everything to its proper place—laid down casually, an object may be lost, for a while, at least. Furniture is never to be moved—there was *one* exception. Mrs. Bretz moved her bed from the wall—the wall that had assumed a place in her consciousness that her independent spirit would not allow.

Independence and courage—they are merged here. When Mrs. Bretz discovers or recognizes that something would tend to cultivate fear or timidity, she goes head on after it. Like a safety chain on the door. Friends importuned her to use one and never to open a door to a stranger. “Why *think*,” they said, “what *might* happen to you.” That statement was enough.

“I know,” remarked Mrs. Bretz, “what would happen to me if I *did* use a safety chain. It would mean that I was giving away to fear—what would be the end? This would no longer be my home. I refuse to be afraid.”

She told me this as she urged me to another cup of tea and more of my favorite chocolate wafers. No, she *didn't* recognize them by their brown color, solely by their shape. “As I've told you, the blind don't *feel* colors,” she said. “Let's be sensible.”

“You're *that*—and the bravest person I have ever contacted,” I said to myself as I prepared to go.



